



BETWEEN PATRONAGE AND REBELLION

Student Politics in Afghanistan

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Introduction

Student politics is an important aspect of politics in most countries and its study is important to understanding the origins, development and future of political parties. Student politics is also relevant to elite formation, because elites often take their first steps in the political arena through student organisations. In Afghanistan today, student politics moves between two poles—patronage and rebellion—and through its study we can catch a glimpse of the future of Afghan politics.

Student politics in Afghanistan has not been the object of much scholarly attention, but we know that student politics in the 1960-70s had an important influence on the development of political parties, which in turn shaped Afghanistan's entry into mass politics in the late 1970-80s. The purpose of this study is therefore multiple: to fill a gap in the horizon of knowledge, to investigate the significance of changes in the student politics of today compared to several decades ago, and finally to detect trends that might give us a hint of the Afghan politics of tomorrow. The research is based on approximately 100 interviews with students and political activists in Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad, as well as approximately 12 interviews with former student activists of the 1960-70s.

1. The 1960s and 1970s

The roots of modern politics in Afghanistan sink to the 1960-70s, when many of the political movements that became protagonists in the civil wars and today's political scene started taking shape. In particular, this was the time when Afghanistan's educated class started growing numerically, due to the expansion of Kabul University, which was established in 1947. The expansion of university education was a priority for Afghan governments from the late 1940s; higher education attracted a rising share of the education budget, until it reached over 40% in 1969, an impressive percentage by most standards (see Table 1).¹ However, the ruling monarchical elite had no plans to actually share power with the new educated class it was forming;

¹ For a comparison with regional countries, see Antonio Giustozzi, *The Politics of Education* (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, forthcoming), Table 7.

the experiment of the “Decade of Democracy” (1963-72) went rapidly awry as the increasingly frustrated intelligentsia started clamouring for more influence, and soon turned against the ruling elite. The radicalisation of the educated class in the 1960-70s was arguably one of the causes of the crisis of the Afghan state from 1973 onwards.

Already, in 1950, an attempt by the pro-government *Klup-i-Milli* (National Club) to set up a student union backfired when during early meetings strong sympathies for opposition groups, such as *Wish Zalmiyan* (Awakened Youth), emerged among members. The union became rapidly politicised, despite attempts by the government to ban political activity within it. The students soon started spreading their activities among the general population, even sometimes travelling to the provinces. After a few months the union was banned.²

Table 1: Percentage share of education budget going to higher education

	1959-60	1962-63	1969	2010 (planned)
Higher education	23.7	28.4	43.6	10.7
All others	76.3	71.6	56.4	89.3

Source: Central Statistics Organisation

Table 2: Enrolment at higher education institutions

1960	1,694
1970	7,832
1980	18,000
1990	24,333
2003	31,203
2004	39,514
2005	39,354
2006	41,892

Source: Central Statistics Organisation

The new generation that was undergoing training in the 1960-70s also became politicised in the universities. Leftist political texts smuggled from Iran or India were being read clandestinely in

² Thomas Ruttig, *Zur Bedeutung der bürgerlichen Oppositionsbewegung der 50er Jahre unseres Jahrhunderts für die Formierung progressiver politischer Kräfte in Afghanistan* (Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 1985).

Afghan student politics: Who is who?

Please refer to the annex on page 16 for a description of each political party and student organisation mentioned in this report.

some Kabul high schools; the more open climate in universities favoured political debates, which soon resulted in the formation of discussion groups that later coagulated into political parties. At the universities, particularly the Islamic law faculties, Islamist texts in Arabic started circulating too. One of the first organisations to emerge was the *Sazman-i-Dimokratik-i-Zanan* (Women’s Democratic Organisation), a leftist group with a strong student component. The *Hizb-i-Dimokratik-i-Khalq* (HDKh, People’s Democratic Party) was the first party to be launched and several others followed. Students were actively involved in the campaign for both parliamentary elections in the 1960s.³ Several later protagonists of Afghan politics cut their teeth during this period, including Mohammad Najibullah, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and many others. Some, like Babrak Karmal, had been active in student politics during an earlier period (he was elected head of the student union at Kabul University in 1950).⁴

The new political parties formed in those days, targeting the intelligentsia for recruitment, had characteristics markedly different from that of the previous generation of parties. The second generation of Afghan political parties was clearly characterised by its roots in the university (and high school) student body. They were parties of the educated class. After its foundation in 1965, HDKh did well in student union elections, but then competition started building, and it split into two main and several smaller factions, weakening its appeal and dividing its vote. The Maoists of the *Sazman-i-Jawanan-i-Mutarraqi* (Organisation of the Progressive Youth) had their moment of popularity before also splitting into several rival groups.⁵ The Islamist *Jawanan-i-Muslimun* was the next to dominate the scene; its internal splits into groups such as *Hizb-i-Islami*, *Jamiat-i-Islami*

³ Interview with Soraya Parluka, Kabul, March 2009.

⁴ Personal communication with Thomas Ruttig, January 2010.

⁵ On the Maoists and their vicissitudes, see N. Ibrahim’s forthcoming paper on Afghan Maoists.

and *Ittihad-i-Islami* during the late 1970s and the 1980s came too late to affect its performance in student elections. Other groups active among students included the nationalist *Afghan Millat* as well as a few smaller centrist groups, such as former Prime Minister Maiwandwal's group and Zabibullah Esmati's *Seda-i-Armanan* (Voice of the Ordinary People). According to interviewees, in the late sixties the composition of the student union council was four Maoists, three Parchamis, one Khalqi, two Islamists, and one member of a small centrist group. The Maoists were becoming the new, big story in town and for some time attracted the greatest attention. By the early 1970s, they were able to send 25 members to the elected council of the student union,⁶ but the Islamists were also gathering strength as the university expanded recruitment and attracted the more conservative youth from the provinces. *Jawanan-i-Muslimun* had eight members elected, equalling the seats gained by *Parcham*. *Khalq* also benefited from the growing presence of students from the provinces and gained seven seats. The students of the eastern provinces contributed to elect four members of *Afghan Millat* as well. The Islamists took the lead and gained a majority in the last student union elections before Daoud came to power and they were ended.⁷

Overall, the sympathies of the student body fluctuated widely, as is to be expected from a student electorate with high turnover, and ideological fashion was a major factor (pro-Soviet, Maoist, Islamist, nationalist, etc.). There is little trace, however, of patronage playing a role in recruitment; indeed, the absolute predominance of anti-establishment organisations is the best indicator of the irrelevance of patronage at this time.⁸

One important explanation is the extent to which the new political movements based among the educated class represented a generational break with the political and social attitudes of earlier political groups. There were many student

⁶ The figures are not directly comparable with those of previous elections because the number of seats on the council had greatly expanded.

⁷ Interviews with former student activists in Kabul.

⁸ Based on interviews with participants in the student movements of the 1960-70s, Kabul, London and other locations, 2006-2009.

activists who were placing themselves at odds with their families by joining radical groups of various kinds. This was often the case of *Khalqi* activists and even more so with the Maoists, who were often coming from conservative rural families. The anti-clerical attitude of many Islamist activists might also have placed them in contrast with the attitudes of their fathers. However, some of the activists were the sons of the liberal intelligentsia of the 1940-50s (*Wish Zalmyan* and other groups) and in this case there was a strong degree of continuity, which was acknowledged.⁹ Some leaders of the non-jihadi parties forming in the 1960s bridged the gap, because they had started their careers in the 1940-50s as liberal reformists and became gradually radicalised, such as the aforementioned Babrak Karmal (among the founders of HDKh and *Parcham*) and Abdul Rahman Mahmudi, who introduced Maoist ideas to Afghanistan. Similarly, many of the *Jawanan-i-Muslimun* activists were not really breaking with their fathers; in a sense, the attitude of the *Jawanan* could be described as an attempt to modernise the religious-conservative attitudes that were predominant within Afghan society at that time.

With the exception of daughters of the ruling elite, Afghan girls only slowly gained access to university education during the 1960-70s. During the 1950s, female students remained a small minority at Kabul University; indeed, during most of the 1950s their share of the total number of students actually declined, and through the 1960s there were large variations in the share of female students, as the more conservative provinces increasingly gained access to university. Only during the 1980s did the share of girls among students rise steadily, as a result of the military conscription of many males and the fact that university recruitment was now mostly restricted to the cities. By 1990, girls accounted for over 40% of the student body. Even after the arrival of the Islamist mujahiddin to power in 1992, girls continued to account for a much larger share of the student body than before the Soviet war (31% in 1995). This all changed during the Taliban period, when female

⁹ For more details on this period, see T. Ruttig, *Islamists, Leftists – and a Void in the Center. Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Come From (1902-2006)* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2007).

education was banned. Even the liberal post-Taliban regime has a smaller share of female students compared to 1995; the percentage peaked in 2005 at a comparatively modest 22.4% and then dropped significantly over the following two years (Table 3).

During the 1960-70s there was significant political activism among female students, although not on the same scale as among males. Essentially, political activism was concentrated among girls from Kabul and a few other cities; little or no activism existed among girls from the provinces, who were also fewer in number because of prevailing conservative attitudes, which considered it inappropriate for a girl to be sent away from the family to study. Female university students were also mostly from well-off families and therefore less likely to be attracted by the most extreme groups. Indeed, most female political activism was concentrated in one of the factions of the HDKh, *Parcham*. The first activist women's organisation in Afghanistan, the *Sazman-*

i-Dimokratik-i-Zanan (see above), emerged from this circle.¹⁰

Table 3: Enrolment in university institutions by gender (%)

Year	Male	Female
1951	91.2	8.8
1956	95.0	5.0
1960	90.7	9.3
1965	80.1	19.9
1970	85.9	14.1
1975	90.8	9.2
1977	84.7	15.3
1990	57.6	42.4
1995	69.1	30.9
2003	80.1	19.9
2004	79.0	21.0
2005	77.6	22.4
2006	81.5	18.5
2007	82.5	17.5

Source: Central Statistics Organisation

¹⁰ Interview with Soraya Parluka, Kabul, September 2009.

2. Post-2001: A different environment

The surviving activists of the 1960-70s tend to view the students of the post-2001 period as much more conservative than their predecessors, for a number of reasons. The control of the educational system by Islamist or fundamentalist groups from 1992-2001 left a major cultural imprint on the way of thinking of the new generation, even when the majority of the students had no political sympathies for the Islamists or the Taliban. Even those who studied abroad, particularly in Pakistan, can have more conservative attitudes than their own parents from the educated middle class; often parents have found themselves being criticised for their liberal attitudes by their own sons and daughters.¹¹ This is seemingly confirmed among secular individuals in Herat, who often report feeling intimidated by the predominant religious climate at the university.¹² The tendency toward religious practice seems to be strengthening. The discussion of developments at Nangarhar's

university highlights this (discussed later), but the trend is not unheard of elsewhere either; at the Polytechnical University of Kabul madrassa, teachers managed to gather many students for Ramazan in 2009, something that would have been surprising in the 1970s.¹³

Another difference with the 1960-70s is that political activity after 2001 was stifled by an official ban by the academic authorities. There is at present no legitimate space to "learn politics" at Kabul University. Although not fully implemented (arguments and debates still occur), the ban has reduced opportunities for parties to develop a following and for students to be politically active, although it cannot be said to have had a great impact. Sometimes teachers punish students who are identified as political activists; for example, an *Afghan Millat* activist in Herat was reported as having had his marks lowered in reprisal. The older generation believes that the arrival of consumerist society to Afghanistan and the moral vacuum of a system

¹¹ Interview with former women's rights activist, Kabul, September 2009; interview with a professor at Kabul Education University, October 2009.

¹² Interview with a professor at Herat University, October 2009.

¹³ Interview with a former *Hizb-i-Islami* member, Kabul, September 2009.

brought from outside (after 2001), which was implemented without much conviction even by its very proponents, have also depressed political activity. Teachers who studied in the 1970s see today's students as cynical about the possibility of change and improvement through collective action; they believe a narcissistic, pragmatic and hedonist mindset prevails among the majority, while the more idealistic minority is attracted by the Islamic movements. Finally, there is no question that students today are also pressed by the basic needs of life even more than in the 1960s-70s (they often go hungry in the hostels), a fact that might force some to deprioritise political activism.¹⁴

In any case, there is political activity among university students in Afghanistan, particularly in state universities, even if it is not possible to speak of a large movement. We did not detect as much political activism in most private universities. Some of the activism is driven by complaints about higher education in Afghanistan. Students with experience studying abroad (for example, in Iran) tend to be unhappy with the quality of the teaching imparted in Afghanistan; those coming from the provinces and without any experience abroad are the most likely to appreciate the teaching in Afghanistan.

Hostels are traditional breeding grounds of student activism and still are.¹⁵ The room once occupied by Hekmatyar is the object of much competition and even the rooms above and below it are highly prized by students.¹⁶ A number of ideological controversies still drive the political debate and sometimes excite tensions on campus. The issue of secularism and Islam as the source of state legitimacy is one of these ideological controversies; in fact, the students of the Islamic law faculties are reportedly the most politically active.¹⁷ The first signs of religious sectarianism are also worth noting. Rising tension over Ashura

celebrations also excited religious feelings among students, particularly Sunnis, some of whom resent the newly found Shiite legitimacy and acceptance.

This sectarian tension tends to mix with ethnic friction, thanks to the strong overlap of Shiism and Hazara ethnicity. Ethnic conflict was much less prominent in the 1960s or 1970s than it is now. In the hostels, students often tend to form ethnic clusters and to socialise within those, even having "closed meetings."¹⁸ Ethnicity is indeed one of the few political issues that can draw significant levels of mobilisation at Afghan universities.¹⁹ Many students from all ethnic backgrounds (but mostly Hazaras and Tajiks) acknowledged the existence of ethnic tensions on campuses. In Mazar-i-Sharif, like in Kabul, the debate over the use of the word *daneshga* (Dari for "university") instead of *poohantun* (Pashto) caused quite a stir, with scuffles and tense confrontations. In Mazar-i-Sharif one death occurred. The National Directorate of Security (NDS) intervened to warn activists about the consequences of their actions. Indeed, the presence of the NDS (which has a department specialising in students) within the campuses (and dormitories) is felt as quite intimidating by the students, who are therefore restrained in their political statements; the presence of gangs related to the main politico-military factions is also a factor of intimidation (see page 12, *Post-2001: Rebellion Surging*).²⁰

Ethnic consciousness is probably highest among Hazara students, not least because the educated Hazara youth tend to be particularly hostile to "traditional" leaders such as mullahs and elders, seeing them as "reactionary and opportunist." Although strongly religious attitudes and ethnic feelings do not necessarily exclude each other, religion and universalistic ideologies tend to moderate ethnic feelings because of their ambition for a wider appeal. The fact that Hazaras are set apart not only because of their

¹⁴ Interview with teachers at Kabul Education University, October 2009.

¹⁵ Observation of Thomas Ruttig in 1983/4 (personal communication, January 2010).

¹⁶ Interview with Hafiz Mansur, Kabul, September 2009; interview with former *Hizb-i-Islami* activist, Kabul, September 2009.

¹⁷ Interview with a professor from the University of Education, Kabul, October 2009.

¹⁸ Interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Herat University (faculty of law and political sciences), October 2009.

¹⁹ Interview with teachers at the University of Education, Kabul, October 2009.

²⁰ Interview with teachers at the University of Education, Kabul, October 2009. In the 1980s there was one KhAD team per floor, pretending to be students (personal communication with Thomas Ruttig, January 2010).

ethnicity but also their religious sect might also be a factor in their sense of a separate identity. In some faculties, prejudices and discrimination against Hazaras were reported, albeit mostly by Hazaras themselves. The fact that the number of Hazara students has risen dramatically creates resentment.²¹

Pashtun students tended to avoid commenting on ethnic issues, or did so cryptically, hinting at “problems.” Tajik students were more outspoken, but the focus of their attention was language issues (ethnic issues as a factor of political mobilisation among Tajik students is discussed later).

Another difference with the 1960-70s is that after 2001 the activities of women’s groups at the universities have been much more restrained; the widespread presence of Islamist groups was perceived to represent a threat and recruitment proved difficult. In April 2009, the demonstration against what many believed to be a strongly gender-biased Shiite Personal Status Law saw the participation of a significant number of female students for the first time, who otherwise had been quite passive up to that point. It is still seen negatively for girls to engage in politics, even if they are readier than ever to engage in other social activities; they often intervene in talk

²¹ Interviews with Hazara students in Kabul University, September-November 2009.

shows on the FM radio, but never in broadcast political debates. Female student activists were more likely to be focused on cultural and associational activities, where they can even play leading roles, as in the case of Mahnaz Pairoz, one of the founders of the magazine *Kawash*. Even in such cases, the associations are often sponsored by political parties and the girls are daughters of party officials; for example, this is the case of the *Milad-i-Nur* (Birth of Light) association in Kabul, which is linked to Sheikh Mohseni and *Harakat-i-Islami*.²²

The few girls explicitly involved in political activities are often returnees from Iran, who are said to be more political.²³ In general, female students who join political parties are likely to have been encouraged by their parents, as in the case of an activist of the *Hizb-i-Azadikhwahan* (Liberal Party).²⁴

²² Interview with Soraya Parluka, Kabul, September 2009; interview with professors at Kabul Education University, October 2009; interview with a Tajik female student from Herat, Herat University (faculty of law and political science), October 2009; interview with a Hazara student at Kabul Polytechnic, October 2009.

²³ Interview with a Hazara student at Kabul Polytechnic, October 2009.

²⁴ Interview with a Tajik female student from Kabul, Kabul University, September 2009.

3. Post-2001: Patronage and Careerism

Since 2001, student politics seems to have been characterised by the predominance of patronage-based relationships between students and political parties; to the extent that students had a genuine interest in party membership (as opposed to merely receiving immediate benefits), they were quite explicit in framing such interest in terms of career advancement. From the organisational point of view, student politics expresses itself through three main forms: parties, associations and student councils (*shuras*).

Parties

The reception of political parties among students varies widely on the basis of their ethnic background. Indeed, few political parties could claim a genuinely multiethnic membership, even

if it is rare for Afghan parties to explicitly claim a monoethnic constituency. The exception is Hazara political parties, virtually the only ones in the country to openly limit themselves to Hazara or Shiite members (depending on the specific party). The initial enthusiasm among Hazaras for the Shiite anti-Taliban factions evaporated quickly after 2001; the old leaders said they received criticism as their past mistakes and abuses were exposed. The “jihadi parties”²⁵ seem to be keen to recruit educated youth; as interest among students faded, they started attracting students through the distribution of patronage, particularly in the form of free guesthouses and small salaries paid to the “activists” (typically 5,000 Afs per month), who also sometimes make a living out of

²⁵ In this paper, “jihadi parties” means those parties involved in the 1992-2001 civil wars.

selling the publications of their organisation. To the extent that there was genuine interest among Hazara students in joining a political organisation, it is clear that political support could not last in the absence of patronage to consolidate it (which does not exclude a role for other factors as well). Only the largest and best funded organisations, such as the two main factions of *Hizb-i-Wahdat* (Khalili's and Mohaqqueq's) and the two main wings of *Harakat-i-Islami* (Anwari's and the late Kazemi's) have sufficient resources to fund its supporters; those parties without such sources of patronage had almost no presence at the universities.²⁶

Contrary to the situation among Hazaras, there seems to be very little competition for influence among Uzbek students. No other Uzbek-based group seems to be even trying to challenge the influence of *Junbesh-i-Milli-i-Islami*, the party founded by Dostum.²⁷ The *Junbesh-i-Jawanan-i-Afghanistan* (Afghanistan Youth Movement) is openly funded by Dostum, acknowledges the link to *Junbesh-i-Milli*, and describes itself as a cultural and social organisation. In Kabul its membership is modest (it claims 100 members in Kabul University) because of the small number of Uzbek students, but is stronger in Mazar-i-Sharif and is present in Herat too. It publishes a monthly in Kabul called *Yashlar Jawanan* (Students Live), the stated aim being to "improve Uzbek culture." The organisation provides accommodation and books to members of limited economic means and has five guesthouses in different Afghan cities, including at least two in Kabul. It also provides financial support to members from a modest economic background (3,500 Afs per month) and distributes much sought-after scholarships abroad, usually to Turkey (about 100 are reportedly provided each year). It also organises popular training courses in computing, English and science subjects for youth.²⁸ *Junbesh-*

i-Jawanan-i-Afghanistan attracts Uzbeks from across the country, including Badakhshan. At Kabul University almost all the Uzbek students are from the provinces, given the small number resident in the capital. Among them, membership of *Junbesh-i-Jawanan-i-Afghanistan* seems to be high, particularly among students from Faryab, who are the largest group. Out of 45 students from Faryab registered at Kabul University in 2009, 15 had membership.²⁹ Although in principle it accepts members from all ethnic groups, all the members we could identify were Uzbeks and their discourse was centred on Uzbek rights and culture.³⁰ As one member openly stated, "the priority is supporting Uzbek people."

In the case of Tajik students, the picture is somewhat intermediate between the fragmentation seen among Hazaras and the monolithism characterising Uzbeks. Most Tajik students flock to *Jamiat-i-Islami* and its Youth and Student Organisation,³¹ including from regions where Tajiks are small minorities. *Jamiat* claims to have 100 students in its ranks in Mazar-i-Sharif and 1,000 throughout northern Afghanistan, as well as 50 members in Herat University and 300 in Kabul universities.³² The Youth and Student Organisation seems to be doing much better in terms of attracting students and in Herat alone it claims 2,100 members, although only a portion of these are from the university. It is a deliberate strategy of *Jamiat* to focus on their youth wing, as they believe that students are not inclined to join political parties, which tend to be considered responsible for many of the ills of the country.³³

Jamiat too provides accommodation for its activists and also pays salaries to the poorest

²⁶ For a discussion of these parties and their differences see Ruttig, *Islamists, Leftists – and a Void in the Center*, and Niamatullah Ibrahim, *The Dissipation of Political Capital Among Afghanistan's Hazaras: 2001-2009* (London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2009).

²⁷ See Thomas Ruttig, *Islamists, Leftists – and a Void in the Center*, and Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

²⁸ Interview with an Uzbek student from Badakhshan, Kabul University, September 2009; interview with an Uzbek student from Faryab, Mawlana Private University (law faculty), Mazar-i-Sharif, September 2009.

²⁹ Interview with an Uzbek student from Faryab, Balkh University (law faculty), September 2009.

³⁰ Interview with an Uzbek student from Faryab, Mawlana Private University, Mazar-i-Sharif (political science), September 2009.

³¹ We did not find much sign among students of other groups that splintered from *Jamiat* after 2001, including the two which derived from *Shura-i-Nezar: Afghanistan Newin* and *Nehzat-i-Milli*.

³² Interview with a Tajik student from Uruzgan, Mawlana Private University, Mazar-i-Sharif (law and political science), September 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Herat City, Herat University, October 2009.

³³ Interview with a Tajik student from Panjshir, Kabul University (faculty of Islamic law), October 2009.

among them, sometimes through the sale of its periodic publications. The main tasks of *Jamiat*'s activists include campaigning during election time and meeting every week or two to talk about the current situation and how improve the work of the party. Every month or two activists from across Afghanistan are taken to national meetings. The party encourages its activists to compete to become a candidate in local or national elections; it has a proactive recruitment policy and encourages members to bring in new recruits. *Jamiat* does not charge fees to its members.³⁴

Judging by our interviews, the political landscape among Pashtun students is as fragmented as among Hazaras, but the level of participation in political activities is lower, except in Nangarhar. This might be due to a higher level of involvement in religious activities and to the fact that a significant number of Pashtun students are attracted to underground political movements (see *student councils*, page 12, and *Post-2001: Rebellion Surging*, page 12). *Afghan Millat* stands out as the most active of the legally registered organisations that are active among Pashtun students.³⁵ Its presence is strongest in Jalalabad, even if the strong presence of the legal wing of *Hizb-i-Islami* confuses matters there; there seems to be some overlap between the two wings in terms of the sympathies expressed by students. In Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat, *Afghan Millat* relies on a small number of activists, able, however, to mobilise crowds of much more conservative and religious Pashtun students on ethnic issues. In Herat University, for example, it claims 15 members. *Afghan Millat*, like most other parties, provides accommodation for its members and promises favours, including help in securing registration in better universities, etc.³⁶ Another secular group, *De Sole Karwan* of Haji Abdul Zahir Qadir, was reported by several students to be quite active in Nangarhar University. According to some, it might be the most active secular (or at least not overtly religious) party at the university,

³⁴ Interview with a Tajik student from Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh University, September 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Dehdadi, *Jamiat* party office in Mazar-i Sharif, September 2009.

³⁵ On this party, see Ruttig, *Islamists, Leftists – and a Void in the Center*.

³⁶ UN source, Kabul, 2009; interview with *Azadegan* activists, Kabul, October 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Herat City, Herat University, October 2009.

even beating *Afghan Millat*, but its recruitment seems to have more to do with patronage than with any ideology or political stance.³⁷

Apart from the underground groups described in the next section, the most active Islamist-leaning organisations among Pashtuns include the legal branch of *Hizb-i-Islami*, which seems, however, to have relatively few student activists and support mostly concentrated in Jalalabad. The breadth of such support can be gauged by the reaction of students to the expulsion of ten students accused of being members of the illegal wing of *Hizb-i-Islami*; demonstrations around the mosque and the refusal of a large group of students to sit the exams forced the academic authorities to re-admit them.³⁸

Few leftist organisations were spotted proselytising among Pashtuns during our research. Apart from the groups recruiting among all sectors of the population, a group that seemed to privilege Pashtuns was Shahnawaz Tanai's *Da Sole Ghurdzang* (The Flame of Peace Party), which was quite active in Herat in the run-up to the presidential elections.³⁹ However, when Tanai's group started its campaign, people gathered in the Blue Mosque to protest against him and a petition to have him arrested gathered many signatures.⁴⁰

Although the tendency among the "jihadi parties" is toward the predominance of a single ethnic constituency, some degree of mixing still occurs. Some Pashtuns are found in the ranks of *Jamiat*

³⁷ Interview with a Pashtun student from Jalalabad, Nangarhar University (faculty of law), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Kandahar, Nangarhar University (faculty of education), November 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Nangarhar University (faculty of law); interview with a Pashtun student from Kapisa, Nangarhar University (faculty of Islamic law). The party elected nine members to the Nangarhar Provincial Council in 2009, out of 19.

³⁸ Interview with a Pashtun student from Baghlan, Nangarhar University (agriculture faculty), November 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Nangarhar University (Islamic law), December 2009.

³⁹ Interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Herat University (faculty of law and political science), October 2009.

⁴⁰ Interview with an National Democratic Institute (NDI) official, Herat, October 2009.

in Herat,⁴¹ while some Tajik students were found in the ranks of *Hizb-i-Islami* and *Afghan Millat*;⁴² one of the latter admitted having joined the party against the strong opposition of his family. The “non-jihadi parties”⁴³ tend to have a more ethnically-mixed membership, although the difference should not be overstated. A “non-jihadi party” that has an almost exclusively Tajik membership is *Kangara-i-Milli*. It almost exclusively attracts students from northeastern Afghanistan, with a small support-base in Herat and Kabul as well. The party organises training courses for students regardless of membership and uses the courses as an opportunity to advertise its positions and invite them to join. Most of its members come from the law and philosophy faculties. This party too provides accommodation for poorer students who have been members of the party for at least two years. Despite its few members, *Kangara* seems to enjoy the sympathy of a wider number of students, perhaps due to the personal charisma of its leader Latif Pedram.⁴⁴ In Badakhshan and Takhar, *Hizb-i-Azadegan* (Liberators Party) taps into a similar constituency.⁴⁵ *Azadegan* is now active in Kabul University, with a few activists and a crowd of 100-200 sympathisers; in practice it functions like a driver of ethnic mobilisation, being at the centre of debates involving ethnic issues. In this sense it is the Tajik counterpart of *Afghan Millat*.⁴⁶

Ethnically-mixed “non-jihadi parties” proved hard to track down on the campuses. In part this

⁴¹ Interview with a Pashtun student from Herat, Herat University (faculty of Islamic law), October 2009.

⁴² Interview with a Pashtun student from Obeh, Herat University, October 2009.

⁴³ In this paper, “non-jihadi parties” means those parties that do not have links to armed militias.

⁴⁴ Interview with a Tajik student from northern Badakhshan, Herat University, October 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Kabul Province, *Kangara-i-Milli* office, Kabul, October 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Kunduz, Kabul Education University, September 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Khowaja Omary District, Ghazni, *Kangara-i-Milli* office, September 2009; communication with students from a hostel in Mazar-i-Sharif, October 2009.

⁴⁵ Badakhshi split from HDKh in the 1960s, arguing that ethnic conflict takes precedence as an issue over class conflict.

⁴⁶ Interview with a former activist now professor at Kabul University, September 2009; interview with an *Azadegan* activist, Kabul, October 2009.

was because of a lack of financial resources. For example, Olumi’s party (*Hizb-i-Muttahid-i-Milli* or National Unity Party) has not been able to go beyond individual contacts, despite being possibly the best organised of the leftist successors of the HDKh.⁴⁷ *Hizb-i-Azadikhwahan* (Liberal Party) is one of those that showed some signs of life on the campuses. Interestingly, *Azadikhwahan* too provides accommodation for its members (although on a much smaller scale than the main groups), but it does not pay salaries to activists. It attracts young people by establishing subsidised training centres.⁴⁸

In sum, what is common to all ethnic groups is the predominance of pragmatism in the choices of students. Apart from attracting some of the sons of the old members, the “jihadi parties” attract students from poor or modest families in the provinces who had no previous link with those parties, but who are looking for a vehicle of social ascent or, more often, simply for affording higher education; many of those joining the parties are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which suggests that the availability of economic support is a major factor.⁴⁹ Some of the members even say explicitly that they do not share the views of the party and will quit membership as soon as they complete their studies.⁵⁰ The most prominent activists are often ambitious young men from modest social backgrounds, who hope for a political career (the most commonly-stated reason for why those with modest family backgrounds flock to a party like *Jamiat*).⁵¹ In the words of one:

In the parliamentary elections I saw that from Takhar Province all the candidates who got lots of votes were members of political

⁴⁷ Interview with a leader of the *Muttahid-i-Milli* youth wing, Kabul, September 2009.

⁴⁸ Interview with a Hazara student, *Azadikhwahan* office, Herat, October 2009; interview with a female Tajik student from Kabul, Kabul University, September 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Ghuryan, Herat University, October 2009.

⁴⁹ Interview with a Tajik student from Balkh, Balkh University, September 2009.

⁵⁰ Interview with student of Mawlana Private University, Mazar-i-Sharif (journalism faculty), September 2009.

⁵¹ Interview with a Tajik student from Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh University, September 2009.

*parties. The local or non-aligned candidates didn't get many votes. At that time I decided that being in a political party is the way to become a politician or MP.*⁵²

Because of this, *Jamiat* has also been able to attract members from families with a strong secular background; one of the students said that his father had been a member of a social-democratic party in the 1970s.⁵³ Few activists from the “jihadi parties” mentioned any ideological reason for joining a particular organisation; they mentioned instead their family background and “becoming a known man in society.”⁵⁴ The activists who follow their father or uncles into these parties tend to be more likely to repeat the official statements issued by the leadership and are not keen to express personal opinions, even about rival parties. Some of them show no deep attachment to the party, despite being keen to claim the role of their fathers in the organisation and in the jihad and civil wars.⁵⁵

If the largest and wealthiest parties attract most students from the poorest strata of society, even in the smallest and least-resourced organisations the typical activist seems to be driven by personal ambition; it is quite common to hear them state their plans for running in the national or provincial elections as a way to become influential, but almost never with a statement of political principles.⁵⁶ In this regard it is worth mentioning that while the “non-jihadi parties” supported by secular intellectuals could attract the interest of students for some time, the expectation seems often to have been that the new political players would rapidly grow and become able to pay their supporters as well. Since this did not happen, interest in the new groups often faded rapidly, as in the case of the *Nehzat-i-Madani-i-Afghanistan* (NOMA or Civil Movement of Afghanistan). Akram Gezabi, the leader of NOMA, enjoys widespread

sympathy, but is not able to consolidate his support because of the lack of an organisation and funding.⁵⁷ Similarly, other popular figures like Ahmad Behzad, an MP from Herat, have not been able to capitalise on their popularity among students because of their lack of resources.⁵⁸ A slightly different case, Ramazan Bashardost enjoys wide popularity as a political leader, but has not tried to organise it and does not have a party.

Associations

A tendency of older leaders to discard their student supporters when they turn out to be difficult to control has given rise to complaints among some of the most politicised students, who said that the leaders are “exploiting and recruiting young students for their own interests...but they will neutralise them if they see them as a threat.”⁵⁹ The crisis in the ability of political organisations to represent the interests and demands of students, as well the degree of political disenchantment and demobilisation and the ban on political organisations, have led to the emergence of a variety of not-overtly-political student associations, mostly claiming to represent students of a particular district or province.⁶⁰ Some of these associations have opened offices in a number of locations, including main university cities like Herat and Kabul, as well as the area of origin of the students. Some associations also lobby in favour of student demands, like a student union or council, but with the limitation of only representing a small portion of the student body.⁶¹ Often these associations have their own periodic publications with stated cultural aims, although often with political content as well. Most associations are essentially monoethnic or tend

⁵² Interview with a Tajik student from Kabul, Kabul University, September 2009.

⁵³ Interview with a Tajik student from Dehsabs in Kabul, Herat University, October 2009.

⁵⁴ Interview with a Tajik student from Herat City, Herat University, October 2009.

⁵⁵ Interview with a student at Mawlana Private University, Mazar-i Sharif, September 2009.

⁵⁶ Interview with a Tajik student from Ghuryan, Herat University, October 2009.

⁵⁷ Interview with a Hazara student at Polytechnic University of Kabul, October 2009.

⁵⁸ Interview with a Hazara student of Polytechnic University of Kabul, September 2009; interview with a Hazara student at Kabul University, November 2009.

⁵⁹ Interview with Najibullah Pazhman, Chairperson of the *Majma-i-Tafahum-i-Milli-i-Jawanan-i-Afghanistan* (Youth National Discernment of Afghanistan), Kabul, November 2009.

⁶⁰ The association of students from Ghazni, for example, was almost exclusively composed of those from Malistan District (interview with a Hazara student of Polytechnic University of Kabul, October 2009).

⁶¹ Interview with a female Tajik student from Herat, Herat University (faculty of law and political science), October 2009.

to drift in that direction. One Pashtun student claimed to have left an association because of its drift toward Pashtunism.⁶² Some of the associations seem to have been conceived as vehicles for the political ambitions of their founders, as evident in the frequently-stated desire of their leaders to take part in future elections.⁶³ One of the founding members of the Ittihad Cultural Centre in Mazar-i-Sharif rationalised his involvement as follows:

*We want to make ourselves famous through this association and I especially want to develop good networks with society and go into politics in the future. I think cultural associations have more trust than political parties in society because we are inside of society and they know us well.*⁶⁴

In some cases, the choice of relying on associations as political vehicles might be due to the fact that other avenues are not open; for example, some of the sons of former members of leftist parties such as HDKh seem to have chosen to be involved with non-party associations, rather than any of the “non-jihadi parties” descendent of HDKh.⁶⁵

Some small, independent associations had to approach the more established political parties as a source of funding. This was, for example, the case with *Anjuman-i-Danishjoyan-i-Afghanistan* (Student Association of Afghanistan), a group led by Najibullah Pazhman and formed in 1381 (2002-3). The leaders approached Sayed Mansur Naderi, the Ismaili leader and founder of the *Jabha-i-Rowshanfikran-i-Afghanistan* political party. Naderi offered help, hoping to get the association to join his party. After nine months the support stopped as it became clear that the students wanted to maintain their independence. As a result, the students had to close their office.⁶⁶

⁶² Interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Herat University (faculty of law and political sciences), October 2009.

⁶³ Interview with a Tajik student from Kabul, cultural association office, Herat, October 2009.

⁶⁴ Interview with a Tajik student from Kabul, Ittihad Cultural Center, Mazar-i-Sharif, September 2009.

⁶⁵ Interview with a Tajik student from Farah, Shaikh Abdul Samad Nazari Association office, Herat, October 2009.

⁶⁶ Interview with Najibullah Pazhman, Chairperson of the Youth National Discernment of Afghanistan, Kabul, November 2009.

Some other associations were more successful at gaining lasting support from the “jihadi parties,” but had to compromise their independence.⁶⁷ In 2008, *Jamiat-i-Islami* started to sponsor *Anjoman Jawanan Musleeh* (Youth Peace Association), which claims 350 members in Herat University and approached *Jamiat* due to a lack of funds.⁶⁸ Similarly, an association of students from Baghlan acts a conduit for the MPs of Baghlan to create their own local patronage network—it provides students with books, housing and training courses. Some businessmen also contribute to the budget of the association, which has offices in Kabul and Baghlan, also paid for by the MPs. It has a political section and already fielded (unsuccessfully) two candidates in the Baghlan Provincial Council elections.⁶⁹ The inexperienced organisers of student associations sometimes managed to attract funding by external sponsors, but the failure to spend transparently led to a series of financial scandals. Some genuinely independent associations can be identified because of the higher fees they tend to charge; the Shaikh Abdul Samad Nazari Association of Irshad Khatibi in Herat, a “political, cultural and scientific association” established at the beginning of 2009, charges much higher fees than usual (500 Afs per month).⁷⁰

Perhaps the most obvious example of the politicisation of student associations is that of *Jamiat-i-Islah Wa Inkeshaf Ejtema-i-Afghanistan* (Society for the Reform and Development of Afghan Society), which is even alleged by some to be a front organisation of *Hizb-i-Islami*. Established recently by Atif Ur Rahman (from Takhar Province) and well funded, *Jamiat-i-Islah* is focused on cultural activities and also maintains a private (but registered) teacher training institute. *Jamiat-i-Islah* is present in great strength at the Nangarhar University campus, where some lecturers also support it, and is also probably the largest association at Kabul University. It is also reported to be active in private universities.

⁶⁷ Interview with a Hazara student at Polytechnic University of Kabul, October 2009.

⁶⁸ Interview with a Pashtun student from Herat, Herat University (faculty of Islamic law), October 2009.

⁶⁹ Interview with a Tajik student from Baghlan, Kabul University, September 2009.

⁷⁰ Interview with a Tajik student from Farah, Shaikh Abdul Samad Nazari Association office, Herat, October 2009.

Some of its members acknowledge the Islamist inclination of the organisation, its support for the establishment of an Islamic government in Afghanistan, and its character of opposition. It attracts many students with its well organised, free revision classes.⁷¹

Student councils

As described in Section 1, the student union council at Kabul University was the focus of political activity within the campuses in the 1960-70s. Since 2001, there has been much talk of re-establishing student councils in various state universities, but at the beginning of 2010, only Nangarhar University was equipped with an institution resembling a student council. It is perhaps a sign of the times that such an institution is strongly

⁷¹ Interview with Hafiz Mansur, Kabul, 28 September 2009; UN source, Kabul, 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Nangarhar University (Sharia law), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Nangarhar, Nangarhar University (medical faculty), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Nangarhar University (engineering faculty), December 2009; Interview with a Pashtun student from Logar, Nangarhar University (science faculty), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Tara Khail district of Kabul Province, Kabul University (faculty of law and political sciences), October 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Uruzgan, Kateb Private University, October 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Khost, Kabul University (faculty of law and political sciences), October 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Wardak, Kabul University (faculty of law and political science), October 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Kunar, Nangarhar University (Islamic law faculty), December 2009.

characterised in religious terms. The *Masjid Shura* (Mosque Council) accepts all students as members and has a president, two deputies, and a council of 23 members elected through a “totally Islamic and democratic election.” It claims to deal with “cultural and religious issues,” imparting Islamic lessons to students, but also intervenes sometimes in political issues and in defence of students. In one case it reportedly lobbied the authorities to release a student of Nangarhar University arrested in Paktia. The demonstrations against the arrest of alleged *Hizb-i-Islami* members in Jalalabad (as mentioned earlier) were organised by the *Masjid Shura*, whose power can be gauged by the fact that they managed to talk with the governor of Nangarhar Province and have President Karzai intervene. Its power and influence even exceeds that of the student union of the 1960s and 1970s; our interviewers had to be authorised by the president before being able to meet any students.⁷²

⁷² Interview with a Pashtun student from Nangarhar, Nangarhar University (literature faculty), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Baghlan, Nangarhar University (agriculture faculty), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Nangarhar University (journalism faculty), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Logar, Nangarhar University (faculty of law), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Nangarhar University (Islamic law), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Wardak, Nangarhar University (engineering faculty), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Jalalabad, Nangarhar University (faculty of law); information gathered by the interviewers in confidential communication with students.

4. Post-2001: Rebellion Surging

Groups

Rebellion among university students in post-2001 Afghanistan expresses itself in two main ways. The first is the formation of politicised youth gangs. The character of these gangs is ambiguous, because although there is an element of generational rebellion against the “system” of university education, they tend to have links to the main politico-military factions incorporated in the Bonn Agreement of 2001. In several campuses the gangs have established control over the students and in at least one case they have demonstrated their power by evicting a rector (at the Kabul Education University). The connections

of the gangs to leading political figures outside the campus make it difficult for the academic authorities to restrain them or punish their members. The gangs build support among students by intimidating teachers to give better marks to selected individuals. Because of their political connections, some teachers are sympathetic to the gangs anyway.⁷³ The presence of such gangs was confirmed in both Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif; in the latter they were largely linked to *Jamiat-i-Islami*.⁷⁴

⁷³ Interview with teachers at Kabul Education University, October 2009.

⁷⁴ Communication with students and university officials,

The other type of “rebellion” is underground political activity, linked to the membership of extremist and anti-government groups. Although the leftist *Anjuman-i-Inqilab-i-Zanan-i-Afghanistan* (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, RAWA) was reported to be active at least in Herat,⁷⁵ the underground scene is dominated by Islamist and fundamentalist groups. Such activities seem rare or marginal in Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat, but there are pockets of activity. The Islamic law faculty at Herat University in particular is characterised by a relatively high level of militancy, with a significant presence of *Hizb-i-Islami*.⁷⁶ The legitimacy of suicide bombings is reportedly openly discussed in the classrooms.⁷⁷ The picture is quite different in Kabul and especially Jalalabad, where significant portions of the student body are radicalising.

Some of the groups recruiting students in Afghan universities are not new and have a solid reputation for subversive activities. In practice, the distinctions between the members of different Islamist groups do not seem to be very pronounced. In fact, sympathisers seem to overlap between the different groups, expressing sympathy for several of them. The dominant insurgent group in Afghanistan, the Taliban, is active within the campuses, but in a relatively limited way. Its constituency has never been the educated class and it is only since 2006 that the group has made its appearance among university students, usually targeting Pashtuns from the provinces with a religious and conservative background. Their presence in Herat is very limited, although some activists were reported, particularly in the Islamic law faculty and to a lesser extent in law and political science. The Taliban do not appear to have an organisational presence in the campuses of Kabul either, just individual

Mazar-i-Sharif, October 2009.

⁷⁵ Interview with a Hazara student from Ghazni, Herat University (faculty of law and political sciences), October 2009.

⁷⁶ The party is officially split into two branches, one legal and based in Kabul and the other still led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and active in the insurgency.

⁷⁷ Interview with an NDI official, Herat, October 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Obeh, Herat University, October 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Herat University (faculty of law and political sciences), October 2009.

preachers and sympathisers who proselytise and distribute propagandistic material. In Jalalabad, by contrast, they seem better organised and to have a stronger presence. According to UN sources, their influence within the campus of Nangarhar University is second only to that of *Hizb-i-Islami*. Most of the Taliban activists and sympathisers in Nangarhar University are reportedly from Wardak Province, Logar Province and the southern region. Several students reported having witnessed at least some Taliban activities within the campus. The strength of Islamist and fundamentalist groups in Jalalabad is attributed by one source to the aggressively secular behaviour of the chancellor of the university, some of whose comments are seen as anti-Islamic by many students. He also insisted on having mixed male-female classes in the Sharia faculty, an Islamist stronghold. The chancellor is also accused of favouring *Afghan Millat* in his appointments.⁷⁸

Despite having been largely overtaken by the Taliban in the ongoing insurgency, the insurgent *Hizb-i-Islami* is still much stronger among students and maintains a presence with its activists. The activists linked to the insurgency are mostly found in Nangarhar University, where they have been involved in organising demonstrations against the Americans on a number of occasions, but they are also present in Kabul and to a much lesser extent in Herat. In Herat, however, some students linked to *Hizb-i-Islami* were arrested by the NDS in 2009, with one of them accused of being in possession of explosives. According to some interviewees, in Jalalabad the underground *Hizb-i-Islami* activists are mostly students whose families are still in the refugee camps in Pakistan, particularly the notorious Shamshatoo. Evidence was found in Jalalabad that *Hizb-i-Islami* is attracting some members from families without a previous background in the party. So strong is the presence of *Hizb-i-Islami* in Jalalabad that even sympathisers and members of the outlawed Hekmatyar branch sometimes do not feel they have to hide their connection. Contradictorily, however, they deny any intention to disturb

⁷⁸ Interview with a Tajik student from Kapisa, Head of Ahd Youth Association – Herat, October 2009; interview with a Hazara student from Ghazni, Herat University (faculty of law and political sciences), October 2009; interview with Hafiz Mansur, Kabul, September 2009; UN sources, Kabul, 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Logar, Nangarhar University (faculty of law), November 2009.

the public peace. Even several teachers belong to the party. The subversive branch of *Hizb-i-Islami* also uses fronts to protect its activities, such as *Jamiat-i-Islah* (mentioned earlier) and *Anjuman Ahad* (Promise Association), which does not hide its Islamist sympathies and opposes the tendency of most student associations to recruit on an ethnic or provincial basis; we confirmed the presence of the latter in Herat and Jalalabad, where it is mainly present in the dormitories and organises occasional demonstrations to demand an improvement in the living conditions of students. It also publishes a newsletter.⁷⁹

A third group established only recently in Afghanistan is *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* (Liberation Party), which was established in Palestine and has since spread to many Muslim communities. It appears to be recruiting mainly non-Pashtuns and to have come from Pakistan, although one of the three members we interviewed was a Pashtun from Paktia. Its presence was reported mainly in Kabul, but also in Herat, particularly within the Islamic law faculty. The party does not endorse violent activities at this stage and one of their main activities is the distribution of night letters. At least one of their members was recently arrested in a dormitory of Kabul University. Some teachers of the Islamic law faculty in Kabul are reportedly also party members. *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* targets highly religious individuals for recruitment in all faculties; the recruitment process is based on an assessment of Islamic awareness and knowledge.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Interview with an NDI Official, Herat, October 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Obeh, Herat University, October 2009; UN source, Kabul, October 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Paktia, Nangarhar University (medical faculty), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Logar, Nangarhar University (science faculty), November 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Kandahar, Nangarhar University (computer science faculty), November 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Laghman, Nangarhar University (Islamic law faculty), December 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Logar, Nangarhar University (faculty of law); interview with a Pashtun student from Herat, Herat University (faculty of Islamic law), October 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Kapisa, Head of Ahd Youth Association – Herat Province, October 2009.

⁸⁰ Interview with Hafiz Mansur, Kabul, September 2009; interview with a Hazara student from Ghazni, Herat University (faculty of law and political science), October 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Logar, Kabul University (faculty of law), October 2009; interview with

The fourth radical group whose presence we were able to confirm in the universities is *Babrha-i-Hindukush* (Tigers of the Hindukush), whose opposition is largely rhetorical. This small group of activists (perhaps just four or five core members) comes from the northeast and is mainly engaged in cultural and publishing activities and operates on the surface, despite not being registered as a political group or as an association. The group seems to rely on sources as eclectic as Karl Marx and Sayyid Qutb for inspiration, as well as the thoughts of Tahir Badakhshi on ethnic issues. It opposes Karzai and “American occupation.” The group implicitly styles itself after the Tamil Tigers, but so far has only talked of taking up arms. The members come from families linked to the old *Jamiat-i-Islami* and still see Islam as a central reference, but have lost faith in the political leaders of the group.⁸¹

Sources of inspiration

An indication of a wider interest in radical ideas and ideologies seems to emerge from the literature that students go for in the bookshops of Afghanistan’s cities. Any radical text with an anti-American content and translated into Persian seems popular; the translations are usually Iranian and little seems to be available in Pashto. Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Ali Shariati and Sayyid Qutb appear to be the most popular, followed by Mawlana Mawdudi and a number of Iranian authors from the early years of the revolution. Sayyid Qutb’s *What We Say* was reprinted several times. Pictures of Castro and Che Guevara are often displayed in university hostels. Iranian books are read also by Sunnis, although in 2007 there was a reaction against some Iranian texts at the Herat book fair.⁸²

Hazara students mostly read books by Ali Shariat,

a Pashtun student from Khost, Kabul University (faculty of law and political science), October 2009; interview with a Pashtun student from Paktia, Kabul University (faculty of law and political science), October 2009; interview with a Tajik student from Baghlan, Kabul University (faculty of science), October 2009.

⁸¹ Interview with an *Azadegan* activist, Kabul, October 2009.

⁸² Interview with an NDI official, Herat, October 2009; interview with an Islamist activist of the 1980s, Herat, October 2009; interview with Hafiz Mansur, Kabul, September 2009.

Murtaza Mutahhari and Karim Soroosh, even if the mullahs are against Shariat. A few years ago, some were reading Marxist literature, particularly at the economics faculty, but the teachers and faculty heads discouraged it. Maoist literature

is also said to be circulating among Hazaras, but discretely.⁸³

⁸³ Interview with a Hazara student at Kabul University, November 2009.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The mix of patronage and rebellion found in Afghan student politics is common to many developing and developed countries. Likewise, the decline of the left and the continuous growth of Islamist and fundamentalist groups has also been seen in many other Muslim countries, as has the extreme fragmentation of liberal and progressive groups.

Patronage as a tool of political influence is looked upon negatively by most social scientists. However, the unprecedented role of patronage can be interpreted positively—at least part of the Afghan establishment recognises the need and usefulness of ensuring the loyalty of young, educated Afghans. The growing ethnic fragmentation of the educated class, which started in the 1960s but has now become generalised, is also subject to different interpretations. It does not bode well for the viability of the political system of the country, although ethnically-based groups might in some cases at least represent an alternative to more extremist organisations—political mobilisation must be based on some ideological formula and ethnic solidarity is not necessarily the most malicious type.

Considering the much enlarged student corps, the number of students actively involved in “rebellious” activities is comparatively low in the post-2001 environment, although gradually rising. However, if we focus on Pashtun students specifically, we observe that sympathy for the armed opposition is widespread. Nangarhar University, the only predominantly Pashtun university included in this study, is a case in point, but the same processes can be observed to some degree among Pashtun students attending Kabul and Herat universities. The first signs of radicalisation have also started to emerge among non-Pashtun students, mostly benefiting *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*. The implications of

these trends can only be ignored at considerable peril: radicalised students could start feeding the insurgency. A political system that offered a genuine chance for dissatisfaction to be expressed through elections and representation might remove some of the existing frustration; however, in 2009 the discredit of the electoral system reached new depths.

Only very modest numbers of educated Afghans and fresh university graduates have been involved in the ongoing insurgency, not necessarily because of a lack of sympathy but probably also because of the demanding sacrifices that such a choice implies. The so far limited repression against students sympathetic toward the insurgency might also have played a role in not pushing them toward it. Caution is therefore advised, given that the growing involvement of students as facilitators of the insurgency might lead to a crackdown in the future.

The overall picture that emerges is one of a majority still supportive of the “system,” but tepid in this support and mostly motivated by pragmatic considerations, and a strongly opposed minority intent on exploiting the advantages it offers, including a relative freedom of expression and organisation. In a different context, one might have believed that the “rebels” would eventually be reabsorbed into the mainstream, after they start getting jobs and forming families. However, given the very high unemployment rate among youth, this is far from guaranteed.

In the end, the predicament of Afghanistan’s students reflects that of the country as whole—it is difficult to imagine how student politics could be fixed if national politics does not lead the way.

Annex: Summary of Cited Organisations

Afghan Millat (Afghan Nation): A nationalist group which also called itself the Afghan Social Democratic Party.

Afghanistan Newin (New Afghanistan): One of the splinter groups arising from *Shura-i-Nezar*.

Anjuman Ahad (Promise Association): Student organisation with Islamist sympathies.

Anjuman-i-Danishjoyan-i-Afghanistan (Student Association of Afghanistan): A group led by Najibullah Pazhman and formed in 1381 (2002-3).

Anjuman-i-Inqilab-i-Zanan-i-Afghanistan (RAWA, Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan): A Maoist women's group, long active mainly among Afghan refugees in Pakistan during the 1980s and also inside Afghanistan after 2001.

Anjuman-i-Rizakaran (Volunteers Association): Led by Asghar Ishraq, see *Sazman-i-Jawanan-i-Iqtidar-i-Milli* (Youth Organisation of National Sovereignty).

Babrha-i-Hindukush (Tigers of the Hindukush): An eclectic group of activists mixing leftist, Islamist and ethno-nationalist ideas.

Dawat-i-Islami (Islamic Movement): Formerly *Ittihad-i-Islami*, its leader Rasul Sayyaf left *Jamiat-i-Islami* of Professor Rabbani in the 1970s and then formed his own group.

De Sole Ghurdzang (The Flame of Peace): One of the successor groups to *Khalq*, led by Shahnawaz Tanai.

De Sole Karwan (Peace Caravan): A party based in Nangarhar Province and led by Haji Abdul Zahir Qadir, the son of late Abdul Qadir and scion of Nangarhar's most powerful family, the Arsala.

Harakat-i-Islami (Islamic Movement): A Shiite Islamist group formed in the 1970s, which split into several factions after 2001.

Hizb-i-Azadegan (Liberators Party): See *Sazman-i-Inqilabi-i-Zahmatkashan-i-Afghanistan*.

Hizb-i-Azadikhwahan (Liberal Party): A liberal party that appeared after 2001.

Hizb-i-Dimokratik-i-Khalq (HDKh, People's Democratic Party): Formed out of several leftist groups in 1965, it brought together the pro-Soviet left for some time, before a series of splits started affecting it. The most important was between the two wings *Khalq* and *Parcham*.

Hizb-i-Islami (Islamic Party): One of the main groups that the *Jawanan-i-Muslimun* split into, it became one of Afghanistan's main Islamist parties.

Hizb-i-Jamhurikhwahan (Republican Party): A secular group with left-of-centre leanings, formed in the 1990s.

Hizb-i-Muttahid-i-Milli (National Unity Party): One of the successor groups to *Parcham*, led by General Olumi.

Hizb-i-Wahdat-i-Islami (Islamic Unity Party): Formed in 1988 out of several Hazara groups, mostly Khomeinist in orientation, it soon split in rival factions. The fragmentation continued after 2001.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Liberation Party): An Islamist group that advocates the re-establishment of the Caliphate, it was originally established in Palestine, but has since spread to many Muslim communities around the world.

Annex: Summary of Cited Organisations (Continued, Page 2)

Insijam-i-Milli (National Coordination): Formed out of a split of cadres of *Harakat-i-Islami* and other Hazara Islamist groups.

Iqtidar-i-Milli (National Sovereignty): One of the groups to emerge from *Harakat-i-Islami*.

Ittihad-i-Islami (Islamic Union): See *Dawat-i-Islami*.

Jabha-i-Rowshanfikran-i-Afghanistan (The Intellectuals' Front): A group formed by Sayed Mansur Naderi, the Ismaili leader.

Jamiat-i-Islah Wa Inkeshaf Ejtema-i-Afghanistan (Society for the Reform and Development of Afghan Society): Politicised student organisation established recently by Atif Ur Rahman (from Takhar Province).

Jamiat-i-Islami (Islamic Society): One of the main groups that the *Jawanan-i-Muslimun* split into, it became one of Afghanistan's main Islamist parties.

Jawanan Musleeh (Youth Peace Association): Student association that claims 350 members in Herat University.

Jawanan-i-Muslimun (Muslim Youth): The Afghan incarnation of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, it was the main Islamist organisation in Afghanistan until it started splitting in rival groups.

Junbesh-i-Jawanan-i-Afghanistan (Afghan Youth Front): A youth organisation linked to *Junbesh-i-Milli-i-Islami*.

Junbesh-i-Milli-i-Islami (National Islamic Front): A largely Uzbek group formed in 1992 by General Rashid Dostum.

Kangara-i-Milli (National Congress): A group of ethno-nationalist leanings, led by Latif Pedram.

Khalq (Masses): See *Hizb-i-Dimokratik-i-Khalq*.

Klup-i-Milli (National Club): The "party" created by Prime Minister Daoud in the 1940s as a vehicle for his modernising aims.

Masjid Shura (Mosque Council): Influential student council-like organisation at Nangarhar University.

Milad-i-Nur (Birth of Light): Association in Kabul, which is linked to Sheikh Mohseni and *Harakat-i-Islami*.

Nehzat-i-Madani-i-Afghanistan (NOMA, Civil Movement of Afghanistan): A recently formed group based among Hazaras.

Nehzat-i-Milli (National Movement): One of the splinter groups arising from *Shura-i-Nezar*.

Parcham (Flag): See *Hizb-i-Dimokratik-i-Khalq*.

Sazman-i-Dimokratik-i-Zanan (Women's Democratic Organisation): A leftist group of activist women, formed in the 1960s and with links to the *Hizb-i-Dimokratik-i-Khalq*.

Sazman-i-Inqilab-i-Mardom-i-Afghanistan (SAMA, Revolutionary Organisation of the Afghan People): An alliance of Maoist and nationalist groups, formed in the 1970s.

Sazman-i-Inqilabi-i-Zahmatkashan-i-Afghanistan (SAZA, Revolutionary Organisation of Afghanistan's

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Annex: Summary of Cited Organisations (Continued, Page 3)

Toilers): A leftist group that opposes Pashtun predominance in Afghanistan and has now merged with other similar groups into *Hizb-i-Azadegan*.

Sazman-i-Jawanan-i-Iqtidar-i-Milli (Youth Organisation of National Sovereignty): Originally *Anjoman-i-Rizakaran*, it was “adopted” by *Iqtidar-i-Milli*, the party of Mustafa Kazimi, as its youth wing.

Sazman-i-Jawanan-i-Mutarraqi (Organisation of Progressive Youth): The first Maoist organisation to be formed in Afghanistan out of informal circles, it later split into several rival groups.

Seda-i-Armanan (Voice of Ordinary people): A centrist group formed by Zabibullah Esmati in the late 1960s.

Shura-i-Muttahid-i-Milli (National Union Council): A group led by a former *Shura-i-Nezar* intellectual Hafiz Mansur, which associates Islamism and ethnic concerns.

Shura-i-Nezar (Coordination Council): One of the internal factions of *Jamiat-i-Islami*, led originally by Ahmad Shah Massoud.

Wish Zalmiyan (Awakened Youth): The first political movement to emerge in Afghanistan in the 1940s; liberal-reformist in character.

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